

The Exemplum in the Literary and Religious Culture of the Late-Medieval Netherlands

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Introduction

Between 1477 and 1479 there appeared in Delft, a town in the medieval county (*graafschap*) of Holland, a printed collection of short prose narrative texts entitled *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle<n>* [Book of Our Lady's Miracles] (fig. 1). Very little is known about the origins of this work except for the fact that it had been produced by Jacob Jacobszoon van der Meer and Mauritius Yemantszoon van Middelborch, two printers who opened a workshop in Delft not long before 1477.¹ A copy of this incunable, one of three known to be in existence in the world, is held in the collections of the National Library of the Netherlands (*Koninklijke Bibliotheek*) in The Hague.²

The structure of this collection of texts appears at a glance to be fairly straightforward. The Delft incunable opens with a preface, in which the book's nature and purpose are very briefly explained. A corpus of 118 prose narratives makes up the remainder of the volume. These stories are largely united by the theme of the miraculous intercession of the Virgin Mary. Apart from this salient feature,

¹ The first work printed by Jacob Jacobszoon van der Meer and Mauritius Yemantszoon was the Delft Bible, which is dated 10 January 1477. Until now little research has been carried out specifically on the *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle<n>* (alt. title: *Miraculen onser lieuer vrouwen*), although exempla from this collection are mentioned, for instance, by C. Honigh, *Middel-nederlandsche Maria-legenden*, „De Gids” 43 (1879), pp. 457–518, as well as in the pioneering study of C.G.N. de Vooy, *Middelnederlandsche legenden en exempelen. Bijdrage tot de kennis van de prozalitteratuur en het volksgeloof der Middeleeuwen*, 's-Gravenhage 1900 (2nd ed. 1926). The author of the present article is currently working on a scientific edition and Polish translation of the *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle<n>*.

² The Hague, 169 G 44 (all references in this article will be to this copy of the Delft incunable).

the sources and themes of this collection appear to be rather eclectic. A significant part of the material is labeled, in the texts themselves, as coming from the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Cesarius of Heisterbach, a well-known collection of exemplary or miracle stories. Other narratives appear to be sourced from works such as *Vitae Patrum* (in the Dutch compilation called the *Vaderboec*), the *Aurea legenda* or the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.

How then should the narratives from the Delft *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle*³ be classified? The anonymous medieval editor did not hesitate to identify them as exempla. The preface informs us that in this volume the reader will find “[...] little exempla [*exempelkijns*]⁴ which are very sweet and pleasant to listen to for all those who serve Mary.”⁵ These “little exempla”, it is stated in the words of the preface, illustrate “how sweetly and with how much love She [i.e. the Virgin Mary] consoles and visits them [i.e. Her faithful].”⁶ This statement is worth exploring further, because, as an indication of genre status assigned by the medieval editor of this text, it also reveals some of the fundamental problems and tasks that confront the modern researcher seeking to determine the place of the exemplum in the medieval and early modern genre system. It is a question that has considerable relevance not only in the context of the study of Middle Dutch literature,⁶ but other medieval European literatures as well.⁷

³ The noun used in the Middle Dutch text is *exempelkijns*, the plural diminutive of the Middle Dutch *exempel*, *exemple* (*exemplum*, *example*). See *Exempel*, [in:] *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* (MNW) *on-line*: <http://www.wnt.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&id=09443> (accessed: 31.01.2014). The lemma *Exempelkijn*, [in:] *Vroegmiddelnederlands Woordenboek on-line* (VMNW) points to the West-Brabantine origins of this word. http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article_content&wdb=VMNW&id=ID13898 (accessed: 31.01.2014).

⁴ “[...] hier sommige exempelkijns van volghen die zeer zoet sijn en<de> ghenoechtelike<n> te horen den ghenen die marien minnen”, s.n., *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle*³, Delft, J.J. van der Meer, M. Yemantszoon [1477–1479], fol. 1v.

⁵ “[...] hoe zoetelic en<de> hoe minlic dat si die hier inder tijt troest en<de> visiteert”. S.n., *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle*³, *op.cit.*, fol. 1v.

⁶ The vernacular exemplum has not been widely studied in the Netherlands or Belgium. Unlike the legend or the folk tale (*sage*), the exemplum is, for instance, entirely absent from H.J.M.F. Lodewick's handbook of descriptive poetics which set the standard for teaching the theory of literary genres well into the second half of the 20th century (H.J.M.F. Lodewick, *Literaire kunst*, 's-Hertogenbosch 1962). The indispensable monographs on this subject in the Dutch language are both by C.G.N. de Vooys, *Middelnederlandsche legenden...*, and i d e m, *Middelnederlandse stichtelijke exempelen*, Zwolle 1953; more recently, an anthology of medieval exempla paraphrased in modern Dutch has been published by F. van Oostrom (ed.), *Voorbeeldig vertellen. Middelnederlandse exempelen*, Amsterdam 1985.

⁷ The European exemplum has an extensive bibliography, therefore, what will be cited here are only a few of the most important monographic publications (in chronological order): G. Frenken,

Questions of definition – what is an exemplum?

The words of the late-medieval editor (cited above) highlight the problematic status of the generic designations used by modern scholars to distinguish between texts of medieval literature that are largely similar in character. Besides the already mentioned exemplum (Mod. Dutch *exempel*), there are two other generic terms that have been traditionally used almost as synonyms of the former. These are the miracle narrative (Mod. Dutch: *mirakel*)⁸ and the Marian legend (Mod. Dutch: *Marialegende*).⁹ Each element of this triad of genres (exemplum – miracle narrative – Marian legend) has its particular *raison d'être* and historical background. Uniting all these elements in a single process of literary-historical reflection is justified, at the very least, by the thematic content of many medieval narratives, which are assigned an exemplary function, but where the main protagonist is the Virgin Mary (therefore justifying the use of the term *Marian legend*), and where, moreover, the central event of the plot is a miracle that occurs as a result of Her intercession on behalf of the protagonist (hence, the term miracle narrative appears to be relevant). Although a number of scholars have commented upon the lack of an unequivocal defi-

Die Exempla des Jacob von Vitry: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Erzählliteratur des Mittelalters, München 1914; J.T. Welter, *L'exemplum dans la littérature religieuse et didactique du moyen âge*, Paris – Toulouse 1927; F.C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*, Helsinki 1969; C. Bremond, J. Le Goff, J.-C. Schmitt, *L'exemplum*, Turnhout 1982; *Exempel und Exempelsammlungen*, eds. W. Haug, B. Wachinger, Tübingen 1991; A. Guriewicz, *Kultura i społeczeństwo średniowiecznej Europy: exempla XIII wieku*, Warszawa 1997; T. Szostek, *Exemplum w polskim średniowieczu*, Warszawa 1997.

⁸ See lemma *Miracle narrative*, [in:] *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms – Methods – Trends*, ed. A. Classen, Berlin – New York 2010, vol. 3, pp. 1911–1915. Generally, in literary-historical research the term miracle narrative is reserved for stories without a demonstrable historical background; with respect to historically-attested narratives about miracles, the term *miraculum* is used. For this distinction see A. Witkowska, *Miracula średniowieczne: forma przekazu i możliwości badawcze*, „Studia Źródłoznawcze” 22 (1977), pp. 83–87. Other scholars, however, see this understanding of the *miraculum* as problematic (see F. Wagner, *Miracula, Mirakel*, [in:] *Lexicon des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart [1977]–1999, vol. 6, col. 656–659 (*Brepolis Medieval Encyclopedias – Lexicon des Mittelalters Online*). The miracle narrative and *miracula* are distinct from, and should not be confused with the miracle play (Dutch: *mirakelspel*), a dramatic genre that often derives its subject-matter from the narrative *miraculum*.

⁹ A very useful discussion of the term hagiographic legend and its problematic status in the context of hagiography is by A. Witkowska, *Legenda hagiograficzna i etiologiczna świętych miejsc i obrazów. Refleksja metodologiczna*, [in:] *Legenda. Problem badawczy. I Warsztaty mediewistyczne*, eds. Z. Piłat, D. Prucnal, L. Wojciechowski, Lublin 2013, pp. 11–26. The term Marian legend (*Maria-legende*) continues to be used in the Netherlands. See *Legende*, [in:] H. van Gorp, R. Ghesquiere, D. Delabastita, *Lexicon van literaire termen*, Groningen 1998, p. 250.

nition of the exemplum,¹⁰ this does not imply that new attempts to draw clear distinctions are pointless. On the contrary, such efforts can be fruitful and lead to new insights; this is amply demonstrated by the work of scholars in the past, who have dedicated themselves to studying this literary form.¹¹

A few key aspects of the most important definitions of the exemplum, proposed in earlier and recent scholarship, may be mentioned here briefly. In the late 19th century Thomas Frederic Crane designated the exemplum as an "illustrative story."¹² His definition was not dissimilar from that which would be formulated a few decades later by Dutch medievalist Cornelis (C.G.N.) de Vooy: "Exempla are short stories, mostly derived from real life, with an edifying or moralizing tendency."¹³ Nearly a century later Claude Bremond, Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmidt defined the exemplum as "a brief narrative, presented as true, intended to be inserted into a discourse (usually a sermon) in order to convince an audience to accept a salutary lesson."¹⁴ More recently, Teresa Szostek has proposed the following definition:

[The exemplum is] a form of a narrative proposition of varying length, including the bare reminiscence of events, of persons, fictional and historical alike, and of situations related to the natural world. [An exemplum] is used in the first place for didactic purposes: to present a desirable model of human behavior or its antithesis, designed to discourage imitation.¹⁵

These definitions tend to illustrate the thesis that one of the main developments in the history of 20th century studies on the exemplum has been a growing recognition of the indebtedness of this literary form to the tradition of classical rhetoric. As a result of this development, there emerged a growing awareness that narration

¹⁰ See B. Geremek, *Exemplum i przekaz kultury*, [in:] idem, *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, ed. B. Geremek, Wrocław 1978, p. 55; see also E. Rauner, *Exemplum*, [in:] *Lexicon des Mittelalters*..., vol. 4, col. 161.

¹¹ A comprehensive analysis of earlier and more recent definitions of the exemplum is by T. Szostek, *Exemplum*..., pp. 9–13.

¹² T.F. Crane, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, London 1890, p. XVIII.

¹³ "Exempelen zijn korte verhalen, meestal uit het werkelijke leven, met stichtelijke of moraliserende strekking". C.G.N. de Vooy, *Middelnederlandsche legenden*..., p. 7 [transl. – M.P.].

¹⁴ "Un récit bref donné comme véridique et destiné à être inséré dans un discours (en général un sermon) pour convaincre un auditoire par une leçon salutaire". C. Bremond, J. Le Goff, J.-C. Schmitt, *Avant-propos*, [in:] *Les Exempla médiévaux. Introduction à la recherche, suivie des tables critiques de l'Index Exemplorum de Frederic C. Tubach*, eds. J. Berlioz, M.A. Polo de Beaulieu, Carcassonne 1992, pp. 37–38 [transl. – M.P.].

¹⁵ T. Szostek, *Exemplum*..., p. 13 [transl. – M.P.].

does not necessarily have to be a defining feature of the exemplum – a point already made by Ernst Robert Curtius in his *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948).¹⁶ For this reason a growing number of contemporary studies of the medieval exemplum (though, it appears, not so much in the Netherlands) seek to situate this form in the context of classical and medieval rhetorical theory and practice.¹⁷ The classical definitions of the exemplum as a figure of rhetoric are too numerous to be examined here in great detail. It must suffice, therefore, to mention briefly two of most important ones. The first, by Aristotle, is from the *Rhetoric* and *Rhetoric to Alexander*, and the second is by the author (identified in the past with Cicero) of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. According to Aristotle, the *exemplum* (*paradeigma*) is part of the process of inductive reasoning, in which analogous statements added together produce the proof of a proposition. As a *paradeigma*, an orator could use either real (historical) or invented events. This latter category was divided into the comparison (*parabole*) and fable (*fabula*)¹⁸. The Aristotelian *paradeigma* could easily find its realization, for instance, in the genre of the anecdote, already popular in antiquity,¹⁹ or in the Biblical parable. The Aesopian fable also conformed to the requirements for a *paradeigma*; this was the genre specifically mentioned by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric to Alexander*. The fable was commonly used for the purpose of exemplification from antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the (early) modern period. Aesopian fables were translated into Middle Dutch as the *Esopet*.²⁰ A printed edition of these narratives appeared, for example, in Delft in 1498.²¹

A somewhat different definition of the exemplum was adduced by the author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, who described it as: “[...] the citing of something done or said in the past, along with the definite naming of the doer or author.”²² Besides the Aristotelian understanding of exemplification as *paradeigma* there ex-

¹⁶ E.R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern 1948. Below, reference will be made to the Polish translation: idem, *Literatura europejska i łacińskie średniowiecze*, tłum. i oprac. A. Borowski, Kraków 1997, pp. 66–67.

¹⁷ See for instance T. Szostek, *Exemplum...*; eadem, *Funkcjonowanie exemplum w systemie retoryki starożytnej*, „Pamiętnik Literacki”, vol. 77 (1986), no. 1, pp. 45–51; F. Wittchow, *Exemplarisches Erzählen bei Ammianus Marcellinus*, Berlin – New York 2000.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1357b, 1393a–1394b; *Rhetoric to Alexander* 1429a–1430b (Aristoteles, *Retoryka. Retoryka dla Aleksandra. Poetyka*, przeł., wstępem i komentarzem opatrzył H. Podbielski, Warszawa 2009, pp. 53, 141–143; 260–262).

¹⁹ For the anecdote as exemplum, see F. Wittchow, *Exemplarisches Erzählen...*, esp. pp. 37–38.

²⁰ A modern edition is by J. te Winkel (ed.), *Esopet*, Groningen 1881.

²¹ [Aesopus], *Die historien ende fabulen van Esopus die leeric wonderlick ende seer ghenoechlick syn*, Hendrik Eckert van Homborch, Delft, 27 April 1498.

²² “Exemplum est alicuius facti auc dicti praeteriti cum certi auctoris nomine propositio”. The exemplum is similar in motive to the comparison (*similitudo*). Cicero, *Ad. C. Herennium de ratione*

isted in antiquity the rhetorical practice of using an exemplary figure (*eikon*, *imago*). This was an historical but also mythological figure illustrating some physical or moral trait (Hercules – strength, Cato – virtue etc.).²³

A useful synthesis of knowledge about the rhetorical and historical backgrounds of the exemplum appeared in the 1960s. Its author, Rudolf Schenda, emphasized the essentially non-narrative nature of an exemplum in its most basic form as a “didactic proposition with a moralizing tendency” as well as “an divertingly told lesson, whose object is to promote good morals.”²⁴ Moreover, Schenda importantly realized that the exemplum serves as both an umbrella term for different literary genres, and as a functional concept, but it is not a genre-designation in itself.²⁵ In consequence, different literary genres, such as the miracle narrative or Marian legend, may be designated by their functional character as an exemplum. The presence of Marian themes in many exempla may have suggested to Frits van Oostrom a hybrid designation: “Marian exempla” (*Maria-exempelen*).²⁶ This “exemplary turn”, as it were, seems to announce a shift away from the prior tradition of genre classification in the Netherlands, where the preferred designations have traditionally been the two aforementioned ones – the miracle narrative (*mirakel*) and the Marian legend (*Marialegende*).

The *Beatrijs* – A Marian legend, miracle narrative or exemplum?

The debate about the relationship of the exemplum as a literary form to genres such as the miracle narrative (*mirakel*) may be illustrated by referring to one of the most important monuments of Middle Netherlandish literature, the rhymed narrative entitled *Beatrijs* [Beatrice]. The single extant text of the *Beatrijs*, the work of an anonymous author, comes from a manuscript dating from 1374 preserved at

dicendi (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*), with an English translation by H. Caplan, London – Cambridge Mass. 1964, book IV, chapter 49, 62, pp. 382–384.

²³ E.R. Curtius, *Literatura łacińska...*, pp. 66–67.

²⁴ “Das Exemplum ist eine didaktische Proposition mit moralisierender Tendenz. Oder etwas deutscher: Das Exemplum ist ein unterhaltsam vorgetragenes Lehrstück, das die Sittlichkeit fördern wil”. R. Schenda, *Stand und Aufgaben der Exemplarforschung*, „Fabula” 10 (1969), p. 81.

²⁵ “«Exemplum» ist also sowohl ein Sammelbegriff für die verschiedensten literarischen Gattungen als auch gleichzeitig ein Funktionsbegriff, keineswegs eine selbständige Gattungsbeschreibung”. *Ibidem*, p. 81.

²⁶ F. van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1300–1400*, Amsterdam 2013, p. 302.

the Dutch Royal Library at The Hague (fig. 2).²⁷ A brief summary of the plot may be provided here: Beatrice, a young nun, was living a model life in the convent, where she helped out as a sacristan. Once it came to pass that a man, whom she used to love before she had taken her vows, came to visit her in the convent. Beatrice's emotions got the better of her, and some days later she eloped with him to a far-away country. There they lived in luxury for seven years. Out of their union two children were born. After that time, the young man ran out of money, and abandoned Beatrice. Reduced to penury, she abased herself by prostitution in order to support herself and her two children, but ultimately her heartfelt longing for repentance proved stronger than the weight of her sins. After seven more years have passed, Beatrice pleaded with God for mercy, asking the Virgin Mary to intercede for her. Beatrice was strengthened in her resolve by the example of Theophilus, another sinner who had been forgiven through the intercession of the Virgin Mary in spite of the enormity of his sins (he had sold his soul to the devil).²⁸ After Beatrice had abandoned her abject, sinful existence, she returned to her homeland. There, she made some enquiries about her former convent. She was surprised to learn that all this time, unbeknownst to her, a "Beatrice" had been living a model life in the cloister. In a vision a voice explained to the protagonist that after she had abandoned her duties, the Virgin Mary, unnoticed by anyone, had taken her place as the sacristan. This miraculous intercession by the Virgin Mary meant that Beatrice was now able to resume her past life (meanwhile, her children had been taken care of by a friendly neighbor). Nonetheless, before the plot had run its full course, Beatrice would still need to confess her sins in an act of sacramental confession and perform the necessary penance.

The plot of this Middle Dutch narrative takes its material from two well-known exempla in *Dialogus Miraculorum* and *Libri Octo Miraculorum* of Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180–c. 1240).²⁹ Numerous variants of the story of Beatrice (traditionally called the *Legend of the Sacristan*) circulated in nearly all

²⁷ Koninklijke Bibliotheek [National Library of the Netherlands], The Hague, 76 E 5.

²⁸ A rhymed Middle Dutch variant of the exemplum about Theophilus has been preserved in the Van Hulthem codex (Albert I Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, ms. 15.589–623). This codex contains other important works of Middle Dutch literature, such as *The Journey of St. Brendan*, the courtly novella *De borchbravinne van Vergi* or the "matter of Troy" chivalric epic of Segher Diengotgaf. For *Theophilus*, see F. van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden...*, pp. 306–309.

²⁹ *De Beatrice custode*, [in:] J. Strange, *Caesarii Heisterbacensis, monachi ordinis Cisterciensis: Dialogus Miraculorum*, Coloniae, Bonnae et Bruxellis 1841 (div. VII, XXXIV), vol. 2, p. 42; *De puella, quae coenobium dereliquit, et decem post annis revertit* [*De puella, pro qua beata virgo Maria quindecim annos servivit in custodia sui conventus*], [in:] A. Meister, *Die Fragmente des Libri VIII Miraculorum des Caesarius von Heisterbach*, [in:] *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Alterthumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte*, 13 Supplementheft, Rome 1901 (III, XI), pp. 138–139.

European countries.³⁰ Traditionally, this Middle Dutch narrative was designated by Belgian and Dutch scholars as either a Marian legend (*Marialegende*) or miracle narrative (*mirakel*).³¹

Although the *Beatrijs* has not been commonly referred to by modern scholars in the Netherlands as an exemplum,³² its text provides a clear indication as to its exemplary function by way of some statements coming from the narrator. The story is described as a “miracle”, which is told as a way of offering praise to Mary, the Mother of God:

In writing verse is little gain.
 People tell me I should refrain
 From wasting thus my weary mind.
 Yet, for the flower of womankind,
 Who mother was and maid remained,
 I have begun a miracle quaint,
 Which God, no doubt, showed to our luck
 In honor of Mary, who gave Him suck.
 It's of a nun I will begin
 A tale [...].³³

When Beatrice finally confesses her sins to a visiting abbot, this devout man is greatly impressed. He decides to tell the story of her life, but disguising the particulars, as an exemplum in a sermon, whereby it might serve as a salutary lesson for others:

He said: ‘I will tell thy confession in
 A sermon for every one to hear.
 And yet, so wisely shall I steer
 My discourse that never any disgrace

³⁰ See L. Ferrini, *Beatrijs. La leggenda della sacrestana*, Pisa 2004.

³¹ Both F. Lulofs (ed.), *Beatrijs*, Leiden 1983, and J.D. Janssens (ed.) *Beatrijs*, Zellik 1986 (p. 98), refer to *Beatrijs* as a Marian legend (*Maria-legende*). T. Meder (ed.) *Beatrijs. Een middeleeuws Maria-mirakel*, Amsterdam 1995, defines *Beatrijs* by contrast as a miracle narrative (*mirakel*). C. Bremond, J. Le Goff, J.-C. Schmitt have pointed out that more than one genre designation is present (in: idem, *op.cit.*, p. 12: “plusieurs designations sont en concurrence”).

³² Even though Middle Dutch authors clearly recognized that the plot of this story could function as an exemplum, see below, footnote 44.

³³ All quotations from *Beatrijs* after the English translation by A. Barnouw, *The Miracle of Beatrice: A Flemish Legend of c. 1300*, English-Flemish Edition, transl. A. Barnouw, introduction J.-A. Goris, New York 1944, p. 19 (v. 1–9).

Shall evermore in any place
 Attach to thy children and to thee.
 To hush it up seems wrong to me,
 The miracle wrought by Christ our Lord
 To enhance His Mother's honor and laud.
 I shall proclaim it in every way.
 I hope that many sinners may
 Be converted by the story
 And spread our dear Lady's glory.³⁴

The conclusions that spring from this are threefold. First, the narrative has explicit object of recounting, or more accurately, illustrating and exemplifying, a miracle performed by God. That such a miracle should not be concealed but, on the contrary, made known as a testimony to many, follows, for instance, from the words of Psalm 78:5–10.³⁵ Secondly, the topic of the narrative concerns essentially not the life of an individual, Beatrice, however interesting it might be, but rather the Christian theological doctrine of intercession (which may be paraphrased as follows: God may be active in the lives of sinful individuals when they turn to the Virgin Mary in their prayers). Specifically, in the context of the theology of intercession, the reader may interpret Beatrice's moral lapse as, paradoxically, a felicitous one (*felix culpa*), because the chain of events in the story illustrates the notion that the infinite power of God's mercy to a penitent human will ultimately prove vastly more powerful than the enormity of his or her sins. Thirdly, the function of this narrative, as revealed in the second passage, will be to provide an exemplification of these matters for the benefit of a group of listeners in the specific communicative situation of delivering and listening to a sermon (fig. 3). Finding application as a homiletic exemplum, the story of Beatrice will serve as an illustration of theological and moral themes, which would otherwise have been too abstract or too far removed from day-to-day experience to be comprehensible to ordinary individuals.³⁶

³⁴ *The Miracle of Beatrice*..., pp. 105–107 (v. 1006–1018).

³⁵ "Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done". Cited after: *The King James Bible Online (Authorized Version)*, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Psalms-Chapter-78/> (accessed: 3.01.2015).

³⁶ A similar situation where "examples" have a salutary effect on an audience is described in the anonymous verse narrative *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (c. 1515). The protagonist, Mariken, a sinner about to repent, remembers once having watched a miracle play because it contained "good

Exemplary lives

The strategy of exemplification offered by the abbot in the concluding verses of *Beatrijs* corresponds closely to what was a common practice in the medieval Low Countries and elsewhere in Europe. This “educational” aspect of exemplification had already been expressed in antiquity by Seneca: “Longum iter per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla” (“The path of teaching by rules is long, but short and efficient by examples”).³⁷ This practice, of course, was grounded in the theory of classical rhetoric (referred to above), which had been then assimilated, in more or less systematic form, by medieval authors. This indebtedness on the part of late-ancient and medieval Christian writers to their predecessors in the classical period has been amply demonstrated, especially, by Erich Auerbach.³⁸ This continuity of the rhetorical tradition had ensured that the exemplum found widespread application in the Christian literature of late antiquity. Its use was embraced, among others, by the Church Fathers, Saints Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. At this early stage, out of the narratives recounting the actions and words of the Desert Fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum*) the hagiographic exemplum was born.³⁹ A narrative of this kind, about the life of St. Anthony the Anchorite, proved decisive for St. Augustine in his decision to convert to Christianity.⁴⁰ Narratives about the holy and edifying life of the Desert Fathers were gathered in larger collections of exempla known as *Vitae patrum*. Later, in the medieval Low Countries, these narratives were to be

examples” (“[...] dit spel is beter dan sommige sermoenen / Daer zijn goede exempelen somtijts in [s]elcke spelen”). *Mariken van Nieuwmeghen & Elckerlijc. Zonde, hoop en verlossing in de late Middeleeuwen*, vert. door W. Wilmink, met een inl. en teksted. door B. Ramakers, Amsterdam 1998, v. 718–719, p. 110. The Polish translation is: *Cudowna historia Maryjki z Nijmegen, która przez siedem lat miała do czynienia z diabłem. Anonimowy mirakl niderlandzki z XV wieku*, przekład i posłowie P. Oczko, adaptacja literacka W. Szturc, Kraków 1998. *Mariken van Nieuwmeghen* has been for a long time classified by scholars in the Netherlands as a miracle play. Recently, Dutch medievalist Herman Pleij has argued for its being a prose narrative, even with some features of a hagiographic narrative (idem, *Het gevleugelde woord*, Amsterdam 2007, pp. 526–531). It may be added to this that *Mariken* is one of the texts of Middle Dutch literature which also have many affinities with the exemplum.

³⁷ K. Panuś, *Historia kaznodziejstwa*, Kraków 2007, p. 144.

³⁸ E. Auerbach, *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter*, Tübingen – Basel 1958. Below, reference will be made to the Polish translation, idem, *Język literacki i jego odbiorcy w późnym antyku łacińskim i średniowieczu*, przeł. R. Urbański, Kraków 2006.

³⁹ See M. Borkowska OSB, *Twarze Ojców Pustyni*, Kraków 2013, *passim*.

⁴⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. with an intr. by R. S. Pine-Coffin, London 1961, VIII, 6, p. 167.

translated into the vernacular as the *Vaderboec*, a compilation of texts by the anonymous “Bible Translator of 1360.”⁴¹ Exemplary narratives from the Latin *Vitae patrum* or the vernacular *Vaderboec* served widely as models of spiritual development.⁴² At the end of the Middle Ages, there appeared various printed editions of the *Vaderboec* (fig. 4).⁴³ Even one of the stories in the *Boeck van Onser Lieuer Vrouwen Miracule*⁴⁴ is an exemplum advertised as originating from the *Vaderboec*⁴⁵. Interestingly, in a Middle Dutch vernacular collection of exemplary stories about the “Lives of the Fathers” one may also find a variant of the “Legend of Beatrice.”⁴⁶

The sermon, which was strictly speaking a Christian form of the classical oration,⁴⁶ made a tremendous contribution to the rapid diffusion of the exemplum throughout all of Christian Europe. The application of exempla found an important advocate in the person of Pope Gregory I the Great (c. 540–604). In the *Homilies* and *Dialogues*, Gregory propagated the recounting of events (especially miraculous ones) from the life of the saints as examples of holiness and virtue. In the *Dialogues*, one of the interlocutors, the deacon Peter, made the following observation on this subject:

[...] as by the exposition of [the Scripture], we learn how virtue is to be found and kept: so by recounting the miracles of holy men, we know how that which is found out and possessed, is declared and made manifest to the world. And some there are that be sooner moved to the love of God by virtuous examples than by godly sermons.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Some controversy exists as to the identity of this author, identified by some scholars as a Benedictine monk from the Brabantine abbey of Affligem (see J. Deschamps, *Middel nederlandse handschriften uit Europese en Amerikaanse bibliotheken*, Leiden 1972, p. 171), or as Petrus Naghel, a Carthusian from Herne near Brussels (see A. Berteloot, J. Hlatky, *Die süd niederländische Legenda aurea und der «Bijbelvertaler van 1360»*, [in:] «Een boec dat men te latine heet Aurea legenda»: Beiträge zur niederländischen Übersetzung der Legenda aurea, ed. A. Berteloot et al., Münster 2003, pp. 35–52).

⁴² See J. Deschamps, *Middel nederlandse handschriften...*, pp. 170–173.

⁴³ *Van den leven der heiligen vaderen*, Hendrik Eckert van Homberch, Delft, 1498, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, 171 D 39.

⁴⁴ *Van een paer volcs*, [in:] S.n., *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracule*<n>, op.cit., fol. 58r.

⁴⁵ *Een schoone exempel van Beatrix die costerinne*, [in:] S.n., *Vaderboeck*, fol. CXXXVr, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, 171 D 39.

⁴⁶ E. Auerbach, *Język literacki i jego odbiorcy...*, p. 33.

⁴⁷ St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Introduction to Book I. The English translation is from Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues of Saint Gregory*. With an introduction and notes by Edmund G. Gardner, London 1911. On-line: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_01_dialogues_book1.htm (accessed: 4.01.2015).

Later medieval authors also understood the exemplary function of events from the life of Christ and the saints in a similar way as did Gregory I. The author of the *Passionael* (the Middle Dutch adaptation of Jacob of Voragine's *Aurea Legenda*) regarded the life and Passion of Christ as an "example" [*exempel*] that should be followed by "saints and sinners" alike.⁴⁸ Similarly to other hagiographic legendaries (*legendaria*),⁴⁹ the Middle Dutch *Passionael* provided readers, apart from a *vita* of each saint, with a number of exempla concerning a particular saint's actions and miracles.

The understanding that human behavior should be an "example" to others emerges from a brief passage in a Middle Dutch didactic poem about the proper morals of the clergy: "[priests] were advised to live a godly life, to give a good example [*exempel*] in word and deed, strengthening the faith of people great and small."⁵⁰ The author of these words was Willem van Hildegarsberch (2nd half 15th c.–c. 1408), the main practitioner in the Low Countries of a genre called the *sproke* – a short didactic poem, sometimes (but not always) with a narrative plot. The *sproke* lacks clearly defined generic characteristics,⁵¹ but its basic function was to illustrate or expound on various social, political, or theological notions. In this respect, the *sproke* displays many affinities with the exemplum.⁵²

St. Gregory's intention, writing the *Dialogues*, was to prove that Italy too had its holy men, whose pious lives and miracles, such as for instance St. Benedict's, ought

⁴⁸ "[...] want der leuen ons heren ihesu christi die almachtich is ende here bouen al, om dat hi om die minne van ons luden arm ende ellendich werden woude: so is sijn leuen alle heilighen ende alle sondaren in een exempel...". *Passionael* [J.J. van der Meer], Delft, 5 September 1472 [=1482], fol. A1r, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent, BHSL.RES.0037.

⁴⁹ Aleksandra Witkowska OSU defines a *legendarium* as a collection of "abbreviated legends" comprising a brief *vita* of a saint as well as a collection of exempla and miracle narratives (eadem, *Legenda hagiograficzna i etiologiczna świętych miejsc i obrazów. Refleksja metodologiczna*, [in:] *Legenda. Problem badawczy. I Warsztaty mediewistyczne*, eds. Z. Piłat, D. Prucnal, L. Wojciechowski, Lublin 2013, p. 15).

⁵⁰ „Oec waen ic dat men hem beval
Dat sy gheestelijc souden leven
Opdat si exempel mochten gheven
Van hoerre woorden mitten wercken,
Om tghelove voort te stercken
Onder tfolc, cleyn ende groote”.

Cited after: F. van Oostrom, *Het woord van eer. Literatuur aan het Hollandse hof omstreeks 1400*, Amsterdam 1996, p. 74.

⁵¹ There is no consensus among scholars of Middle Dutch literature as to the definition of a *sproke* "other than that it is short and rhymes", according to T. Meder, *Een kudde sproken: genre of repertoire?*, „Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden” 5 (1998), p. 78.

⁵² Andrzej Dąbrówka has identified the *sproke* with the exemplum. See *Sproke*, [in:] idem, *Słownik pisarzy niderlandzkiego obszaru kulturowego*, Warszawa 1999, pp. 251–252.

to be an example to others.⁵³ The *Dialogues* exerted a profound influence on later medieval Christian literature. Traces of this influence may be discovered, for instance, in the structure and content of Cesarius of Heisterbach's important collection of exemplary tales, *Dialogus miraculorum*. Like the *Dialogues*, Cesarius' work took the shape of a fictional dialogue between two men (here, a novice and a master of the novitiate), whose conversation was interspersed with an abundant number of exempla. The impact of the *Dialogues* reached the Low Countries too. St. Gregory's work was translated into Middle Dutch by a South-Brabantine monk working in the so-called "Red Monastery" (*Rooklooster*) in the forest of Soignes (Zoniënwood) near Brussels during the closing years of the 14th century. A north-Netherlandish translation was produced, at a slightly later date, in the circles of the Modern Devout.⁵⁴ An eloquent exhortation to contemplate the *vitae* of the Holy Fathers as the exempla of a truly Christian life, was placed by Thomas à Kempis in his *Imitation of Christ* (I, 18).⁵⁵ This remark attested to the importance of hagiographic exemplary literature to the religious culture of the Low Countries. The *Imitation* is, of course, to this day is one of the most important religious-theological texts from the Low Countries, and moreover, one that has secured an undisputed position in the canon of European and world literature.

The homiletic exemplum

The 12th and 13th centuries were a time when the Christian culture of Europe entered a phase of accelerated growth in the fields of culture and social-economic relations. The reforms initiated during the pontificate of St. Gregory VII (1073–1085) stimulated a spiritual renewal that was to have momentous consequences in many areas of medieval society. Importantly, where the dissemination of exemplary literature is concerned, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) made the preaching of sermons mandatory in all churches.⁵⁶ The Council's constitutions on pastoral care (*cura animarum*) were primarily implemented by the mendicant orders,⁵⁷ but also by the established Benedictine, Cistercian or Norbertan orders, and by the secular clergy.

⁵³ E. Auerbach, *Język literacki i jego odbiorcy...*, p. 90.

⁵⁴ J. Deschamps, *Middel nederlandse handschriften...*, pp. 177–182.

⁵⁵ T. à Kempis, *Naśladowanie Chrystusa*, przeł. S. Kuczkowski S.J., Kraków 2012, pp. 46–49.

⁵⁶ K. Panuś, *Historia kaznodziejstwa...*, p. 124.

⁵⁷ M. Menzel, *Predigt und geschichte. Historische Exempel in der geistlichen Rhetorik des Mittelalters*, Köln – Weimar – Wien 1998, pp. 90–116.

Since the 12th century the authors of homiletic manuals (*artes praedicandi*) systematically turned their attention to the exemplum.⁵⁸ A revival of classical rhetoric meant that for the first time (pseudo-)classical historical themes entered the sermon alongside Biblical subject-matter.⁵⁹ A medieval preacher could now make use of exemplary stories on a range of different subjects, selecting narratives that were appropriate to the sensitivity and intellectual horizons of the listeners. A specific place was assigned to exempla in the structure of a medieval sermon. The typical sermon opened with a prayer, after which the preacher read an excerpt of the Holy Scripture (*lectio*). Then, the topic of the sermon was formulated (*expositio*, *divisio*), and the listeners were made familiar with it by way of an introduction (*prothema*, *exordium*). The *prothema* developed the central ideas of the sermon in such a way as to allow the listeners to engage imaginatively with the subject at hand. Exempla were most commonly used in this part of the sermon, as well as in its actual “body” or *corpus* (called the *tractatio*).⁶⁰ Exempla could be used as elements of the argumentation (whose structure could even be illustrated by examples too), in the process of elucidating the subject-matter, but also – without an intrinsic relation to the content – as a way of reviving the listeners’ attention.⁶¹ In actual practice, however, it seems, at least judging by the surviving Middle Dutch written model sermons, that the authors of such texts paid only very scant attention to the application of exempla,⁶² leaving the implementation to the preachers themselves.

The truthfulness of exempla

Diverting exemplary stories could be serious or humorous. Such narratives included not only the already mentioned historical or pseudo-historical accounts, but

⁵⁸ K. Panuś, *Historia kaznodziejstwa...*, pp. 143–144.

⁵⁹ M. Menzel, *Predigt und geschichte...*, p. 33.

⁶⁰ K. Panuś, *Historia kaznodziejstwa...*, pp. 138–141.

⁶¹ J. Klein, *Exemplum*, [in:] *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* hrsg. von G. Ueding, Tübingen 1996, vol. 3, cols. 60–71.

⁶² See esp. T. Mertens, *De Middelnederlandse preek. Een voorbarige synthese*, [in:] idem, P. Stoop, C. Burger (eds.), *De Middelnederlandse preek*, Hilversum 2009, pp. 9–66 (*Middelnederlandse studies en bronnen CXVI*). Mertens refers to the use of exempla in the *corpus* (*dilatatio*) of the Middle Dutch sermon (p. 13), but the model sermon texts cited by him offer no proof of the actual use of exempla in this context. Other articles in this volume also support the conclusion that the application of exempla was evidently not a matter of great concern for the authors of Middle Dutch authors of written sermons.

also fables and folktales that, even though they were obviously fictitious, could be effectively used to illustrate moral situations. An unintended outcome of this practice was that a debate developed around the question of the truthfulness of the exemplum, creating a problem that continues to perplex and fascinate the readers and listeners of exemplary literature to this day.⁶³ Some medieval writers in the Low Countries reacted sharply to the critique of the exemplum. Among them was Jan van Boendale (1279–c. 1350), an author of historical and didactic works in the vernacular. Boendale argued that exempla, such as animal fables, afforded their listeners beneficial moral lessons, even though the events depicted were clearly a product of their authors' imagination. On the subject of the popular allegorical beast epic about Reynard the Fox,⁶⁴ he commented: "[...] this story was invented for the sake of learning and wisdom [...] because a difficult thought may be illuminated by an example [*exemple*]"; After all, Jesus himself had spoken in parables."⁶⁵ Moreover, in a text from the Comburg Codex an anonymous writer cautioned the readers and listeners to look for the moral sense instead of purely factual information: "One may give examples [*exempel*] here and there / Not because all of them are actually true / But because they help us to

⁶³ Scholars working in the epistemological tradition of the Enlightenment were often inclined to reject all exempla with a miraculous content as the evidence of a *superstitious* medieval mindset. See, for instance, these words by the early 20th-century editor of the works of Cesarius of Heisterbach, Aloys Meister: "Man war geneigt, das Unglaublichste zu glauben; das Mittelalter setzte ja der Leichtgläubigkeit keine Grenzen"; idem, *Die Fragmente des Libri VIII Miraculorum...*, p. XXXI. In later decades, when the history of mentality became the primary guideline for understanding the medieval exemplum, the issue of truthfulness or credibility lost much of its urgency. See on this subject e.g. B. Geremek, *Fabula, konwencja, źródło*, [in:] Z. Stefanowska, J. Sławiński, *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne*, Warszawa 1978, p. 114.

⁶⁴ The vernacular beast epic *Van den vos Reynaerde* was modeled on similar Latin and French texts. Written before 1279 in or around Ghent, it gave rise to a second Middle Dutch variant (*Reynaerts historie*, 1st half 15th c.). Other famous narratives on the theme of the cynical fox include Geoffrey Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* and Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs*. See P. Wackers, *Words and deeds in the Reynaert stories*, [in:] *Medieval Dutch Literature in its European Context*, ed. E. Kooper, Cambridge 1994, pp. 131–150.

⁶⁵ Dat dese dinc vonden was,
Was al om lere ende wijsheit,
[...] Want een sin, die is zwaer,
Die maken exemple claer;
Want in parabolē God selve sprac
Sine sermoene die hi vertrac.

J. van Boendale, *Der leken spiegel* III, 15, vs. 192–198. Cited after: G.H.M. Claassens, *De dichter liegt, maar hij spreekt toch de waarheid. Over feit en fictie in middeleeuwse literatuur*, [in:] *Medioneerlandstiek. Een inleiding tot de Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, eds. R. Jansen-Sieben, J. Janssens, F. Willaert, Hilversum 2000, p. 186.

better understand / The difference between good and evil.”⁶⁶ When exemplary narratives concerned religious truths, as in miracle narratives or hagiographies, they were understood not in terms of *fabula* but *historia*.⁶⁷ Similarly, the modern reader, like his or her medieval predecessor, should interpret the meaning of such stories on a different level than the purely factual one, even though he or she might find the narrated events to be improbable or far-fetched. This point was emphasized by Andrzej Borowski:

The sometimes deliberate fictitiousness of certain elements [of the plot] must not depreciate the medieval legend as a didactic or even as a parenetic text. [...] What is the most important in the legend, as well as in all medieval historiography, is the moral truth to which the construction of the plot is subservient, rather than its factual credibility. This question attracts the attention of the historian, the investigator of documents and the scholar of literature, for whom fiction is no less true than a historical document – even though it speaks a different language.⁶⁸

A medieval “bestseller” and an important source of non-religious exempla placed in the category of *historia*, was a collection of stories known as *Gesta Romanorum*. Containing a variety of sometimes manifestly fictitious parenetic tales about the life of the ancient Romans, the *Gesta* were widely read, translated and imitated throughout medieval Europe.⁶⁹ In the Low Countries a vernacular version appeared under the title *Die gesten van Romen*.⁷⁰ Another collection of pseudo-histo-

⁶⁶ “Exempel vertrectmen hier ende daer / niet om datsi alle zijn waer / maer omdatmer bi verstaet / ondersceet tusschen goet ende quaet”. Cited after: F. van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden...*, p. 304.

⁶⁷ Medieval authors were generally aware of this distinction, which had been made by St. Isidore of Seville after Cicero. Nonetheless, as Peter G. Bietenholz points out, the boundary between both categories was vague. Idem, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age*, Leiden 1994, p. 60, *passim*. For the next stages in the evolution of *historia* as a concept in the context of exemplification practices, see K. Stierle, *Historia jako exemplum – exemplum jako historia. O pragmatyce i poetyce tekstów narracyjnych* [orig. title *Geschichte als Exemplum – Exemplum als Geschichte: Zur Pragmatik und Poetik narrativer Texte*], przeł. M. Łukasiewicz, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 69 (1978), 4, pp. 333–363.

⁶⁸ A. Borowski, *Powrót Europy*, Kraków 1999, p. 34 [transl. – M.P.].

⁶⁹ The first known Polish edition: *Historie rozmaite z rzymskich i innych dzieł wybrane z wykładami ich obyczajnymi, ludzi ku rozmyślowaniu mądrości i też innych cnót przywodzące*, Kraków 1540. See J.S. Bystron, *Historie rzymskie*, Kraków 1894. A recent translation is by P. Herz, *Gesta romanorum. Historie rzymskie*, Warszawa 2001.

⁷⁰ The *editio princeps* was printed in Gouda by Gheeraert Leeu (30 April 1481); it is preserved in the collections of Streekarchief Midden-Holland, Gouda, 2306 E 2. A different edition was printed in Delft by Jacob Jacobszoon van der Meer on 18 November 1483. For a complete bibliography, see L. Delbaene, *De Nederlandse volksboeken. Ontstaan en geschiedenis van de Nederlandse prozaromans, gedrukt tussen 1475 en 1540*, Hulst 1977, p. 248.

rical tales whose function was to exemplify moral behavior, was *Historia septem sapientium*. This frame narrative of Middle-Eastern provenance told the story of the Roman emperor Pontian, whose son Diocletian had been unjustly accused by his stepmother, the empress, of trying to seduce her. Because Diocletian learned that for his own safety he ought to remain silent, he was unable to defend himself against this false accusation. The emperor's seven advisors (the "sages" of the title) assisted him in the search for the truth. Each day one of them recounted exempla about the mendacity of women; the empress, on the other hand, responded by telling stories about untrustworthy advisors.⁷¹ This narrative was printed under the title *Historie van die seven wise mannen van Romē* in Delft by Jacob van der Meer on 13 January 1483.⁷² It may be added that the story of Pontian was known to Polish readers as well, through a translation by Jan of Koszyce (c. 1530).⁷³ These and similar printed narratives in prose are generally classified as chapbooks in English; the relevant modern Dutch term is "prose romance" (*prozaroman*), which has supplanted the earlier *volksboek*.⁷⁴

Exemplaria from the Low Countries

The proliferation of exempla increased the demand for dedicated collections called *exemplaria*. It was imperative to organize exempla in a systematic way, were they to be retrieved effectively for application in sermons or other communicative contexts. An *exemplarium* helped a preacher or writer to easily find the right example to illustrate the subject-matter at hand. While a topical division was representative of most exempla collections (for instance in Cesarius' *Dialogue*), gradually the authors of such compilations started combining a thematic organization into *loci communes* with an alphabetic classification.

⁷¹ R.-H. Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung. Studien zu den "Sieben weisen Meistern"*, Berlin – New York 2000 (Scriinium Friburgense 14) is a recent analytical study of *Historia septem sapientium*; Steinmetz also provides a summary of the plot on which the above text is based, pp. 1–2.

⁷² The *editio princeps*, entitled *Die seven wijse mannen van Romē*, appeared as the work of Gheeraert Leeu at Gouda on 25 July 1479. For a complete bibliography, see L. Delbaene, *De Nederlandse volksboeken...*, p. 161.

⁷³ *Poncjān (Historia o siedmiu mędracach) przekładania Jana z Koszyczek, 1540*, wyd. J. Krzyżanowski, Kraków 1927.

⁷⁴ This category was defined by L. Delbaene, *De Nederlandse volksboeken...*, *passim*. See also *Romans prozą XV/XVI w.*, [in:] A. Dąbrowka, *Słownik pisarzy niderlandzkiego obszaru kulturowego...*, pp. 233–234.

In recent studies on this subject, a certain overlapping of genological criteria may be observed. Many *exemplaria* are the object of scholarly research as collections of miracle narratives.⁷⁵ The previously mentioned *legendaria* (*legendaria*) were another category of texts, where many exempla are to be found.⁷⁶

Medieval Latin authors in the Low Countries quickly picked up on the developments in the field of *exemplaria* simultaneously taking place elsewhere on the European continent. It is important to note at this point that although the European exponents of this type of literature, obviously, cannot be discussed here at length, one should always be aware of the importance of the international context of the exemplum form.⁷⁷ A very innovative alphabetically-ordered *exemplarium* created in the Low Countries was the *Liber exemplorum* by Wiger of Utrecht. Its author, active in the years 1209–1238, was provost of Utrecht's Collegiate of St. Peter.⁷⁸ Similarly as the Latin *exemplaria* that were being compiled elsewhere, their equivalents in the Low Countries also had an impact that often extended to other regions of Europe, and to literature in Middle Dutch as well as in other vernaculars. During the early years of the 14th century, for instance, Arnold of Liège created a collection of 805 exempla organized in an alphabetical order (*Alphabetum narrationum*). When during the next century this immensely popular collection became known in the British Isles, a Middle English translation made its appearance (*An Alphabet of Tales*).⁷⁹

The spatial and temporal “journeys” of exempla collections from the Low Countries

The international impact of the *exemplaria* from the Low Countries may be best judged by the fortunes of a collection entitled *Speculum exemplorum*. Its *editio*

⁷⁵ C. Daxelmüller, *Exempelsammlungen*, [in:] *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*..., vol. 3, cols. 55–60.

⁷⁶ A. Witkowska, *Legenda hagiograficzna*..., p. 15.

⁷⁷ Or, as A.M.J. van Buuren observed: “Von einer spezifisch mndl. E.-Lit. kann allerdings nicht die Rede sein”. A.M.J. van Buuren, *Exempel, Exemplum, V. Mittelniederländische Literatur*, [in:] *Lexicon des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart [1977]–1999, vol. 4, cols. 164–165 (*Brepolis Medieval Encyclopaedias – Lexicon des Mittelalters Online*).

⁷⁸ The modern critical edition is the work of D.R. Winter, *The Liber Exemplorum of Master Wiger of Utrecht. Study and Text*, Toronto 2000. Winter argues for the advanced character of this collection, ahead of other contemporary *exemplaria* with a similar structure (see *idem*, *Master Wiger of Utrecht's Liber exemplorum sub titulis redactorum*, „Journal of Medieval History” 38 (2012) no. 4, pp. 443–471).

⁷⁹ C. Ribaucourt, *Alphabet of tales*, [in:] *Les Exempla medievaux*..., p. 197.

princeps appeared in Deventer in 1481. This city situated in the region of Overijssel was at that time one of the most important centers of the *Devotio Moderna* movement. The *Speculum exemplorum* was most probably compiled in the Franciscan circles there. The anonymous editors formed ten categories (*distinctiones*), to which they assigned individual exempla in alphabetical order. According to scholars, this collection “marked the highpoint of excellence that the medieval exempla collections were to reach in the course of three centuries”, and moreover, it ought to be recognized as “an excellent example of an encounter, in the right place and at the right time, between an intellectual technique (a system of classification) and a new material technique (the invention of print).”⁸⁰

The printing press was also responsible for the further dissemination of this *exemplarium* in later ages. As it turned out, the reception of the stories from the *Speculum exemplorum* transcended the boundaries of political, linguistic and cultural areas. At the beginning of the 17th century Joannes Maior S.J. supplemented the stories from the old *Speculum exemplorum* with tales from other collections. The result was the *Magnum speculum exemplorum*, printed at Douai (then a university town in the Spanish Netherlands) in 1603. Nearly 20 editions of this collection had been published until the mid-18th century. From a very early date translations into other languages started appearing. In 1612, the first Polish translation was completed by Szymon Wysocki S.J. (*Wielkie zwierciadło przykładów więcey niżeli z ośmdziesiąt autorów z rozmaitych Historji, Traktatów i książek wyięte przez iednego niemianowanego [...]*, Cracow: Jan Scharffenberger, 1612), and others swiftly followed.⁸¹ The 1621 translation was produced in the Cracow workshop of Maciej Andrzejowczyk. Cracow, however, turned out not to be the final destination on this book's international journey. At the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries the Polish translation of *Magnum speculum exemplorum* was translated by Ioan Przysłopski, an author writing in the Ukrainian language. This work eventually made an important contribution to the development of the parenetic literature of the Eastern (Orthodox) Church.⁸² In Western Europe, on the other hand, the *exemplum* became an important component of the catechetical and parenetic writings of Protestant authors. Such works were written and widely disseminated by Calvinist pastors in the Dutch Republic over the course of the 17th and 18th century.⁸³ One of the most influential authors

⁸⁰ C. Bremond, J. Le Goff, J.-C. Schmitt, *L'«exemplum»...*, p. 63 [transl. – M.P].

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁸² *Wielkie zwierciadło przykładów w ruskim tłumaczeniu Ioana Przysłopskiego z 1732 roku*, oprac. E. Rudolf-Ziółkowska, Kraków 2004.

⁸³ A number of these texts are mentioned by J. Exalto, *Het goede voorbeeld. Zeventiende-eeuwse jeugdcultuur en het exempel in de gereformeerde opvoeding*, [in:] *Losbandige jeugd. Jongeren en moraal*

of didactic poetry during this time was Jacob Cats (1577–1660), who authored a collection of poetic novellas about married couples. The *Trou-ringh* (1637), as this work was called, has been placed firmly by its modern editor, Johan Koppenol, in the tradition of exemplary literature.⁸⁴ These developments argue in favor of concluding that in Europe at that time the exemplum was exceptional in its ability to transcend with such unparalleled ease and swiftness even most profound boundaries of religion, culture and language.

Middle Dutch theological, historical and parenetic texts as sources of exempla

Exemplaria offered the most effective method of organizing an extensive corpus of narrative material, but their existence should not make us oblivious to the exponential growth in the number of exempla used by the authors of medieval theological, scientific, historical and political literature. Typically, as J.J. Murphy wrote, “[...] in medieval manuals, the space given to examples outweighs the description which the examples illustrate.”⁸⁵ Although this is a hyperbole, it is in many ways true of Middle Dutch literature as well. While it is not possible, of course, to enumerate all works from the Low Countries whose authors made use of exempla, a few of the most important texts must be mentioned here.⁸⁶ A key theological treatise which contained a number of exempla was Dirc van Delf’s (c. 1365–1404) *Tafel van den kersten ghelove*, a vernacular catechism written for Albrecht of Bavaria, count of Holland, at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries.⁸⁷ Jan van Ruusbroec transmitted in his writings an exemplum about three gluttonous monks.⁸⁸ Johannes Brugman, the noted writer of homilies, also resorted to exempla.⁸⁹ Next, there was the

in de Nederlanden tijdens de late Middeleeuwen en de Vroegmoderne Tijd, with an introduction by Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, eds. L. Groenendijk, B. Roberts, Hilversum 2004, pp. 73–93.

⁸⁴ J. Cats, *Verhalen uit de Trou-ringh*, ed. J. Koppenol, Amsterdam 2003, p. 6. See also Cats, *Jacob*, [in:] A. Dąbrowka, *Słownik pisarzy niderlandzkiego obszaru kulturowego...*, p. 74.

⁸⁵ J.J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1974, p. 159; cited after: J. Klein, *Exemplum*, [in:] *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik...*, vol. 3, cols. 60–71.

⁸⁶ This enumeration is based partly on A.M.J. van Buuren, *Exempel, Exemplum*.

⁸⁷ Dirc van Delf, *Tafel van den kersten ghelove*, naar de handschriften uitgegeven, ingeleid en van aantekeningen voorzien door L.M.Fr. Daniëls, Antwerp – Nijmegen – Utrecht 1937–1939, 3 vols.

⁸⁸ C.G.N. de Vooys, *Middelnederlandsche legenden en exempelen...*, p. 57.

⁸⁹ See for instance Brugman’s exemplum about three clerks (*Een scoen exempel van drie clercken*) in: idem, *Verspreide sermoenen*, uitgeg. met inl. en toelichtingen door A. van Dijk O.F.M. Antwerpen 1948, pp. 78–81.

Spiegel historiael, a vernacular translation by Jacob van Maerlant (c. 1235–1300) of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*. It too comprised a number of Marian miracle narratives with an exemplary function.⁹⁰ Among the major parenetic treatises containing large numbers of exempla one should also include: the *Bonum universale de apibus* of Thomas of Cantimpré (translated into Middle Dutch as the *Bienboec* or *Der byen boec*),⁹¹ an allegorical treatise on Church governance using the metaphor of a beehive, *Dat scaecspel* (an allegorical tract describing the order of medieval society in terms of a game of chess),⁹² and *Dat kaetspel ghemoralizeert* (similar, but using the example of *kaetspel*, a medieval ball game).⁹³ Some exempla may be found in the text of *Des coninx summe*, a Middle Dutch "mirror for princes" adapted from the French *Somme le Roi*.⁹⁴ Other authors, who generously used exempla, were Jan van Boendale, the author of the vernacular encyclopedia *Lekenspiegel*, and Dirc Potter, the author of an Ovidian *ars amandi* entitled *Der minnen loep*.⁹⁵

Miracula and miracle narratives

Other important genres that various medieval authors employed for the purpose of exemplification were the *miraculum* and miracle narrative.⁹⁶ The *miraculum*, sim-

⁹⁰ See F. van Oostrom, *Stemmen op schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur van het begin tot 1300*, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 532–533.

⁹¹ See W.A. van der Vet, *Het Biënboec van Thomas van Cantimpré en zijn exempelen*, 's Gravenhage 1902.

⁹² The Middle Dutch text was an adaptation of Jacob de Cessolis' *Ludus scaccorum*. See J. van Herwaarden, *Dat scaecspel. Een profaan-ethische verkenning*, [in:] *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, ed. J. Reynaert et al., Amsterdam 1994, pp. 304–321; for a Polish development of this theme, in the mock-heroic poem *Szachy* [Chess] by Jan Kochanowski (1530–1584), see P. Oczko, *Szachy*, [w:] *Jan Kochanowski. Lektury Polonistyczne*, ed. A. Gorzkowski, Kraków 2001, pp. 221–261.

⁹³ J. van den Bergh, *Dat kaetspel ghemoralizeert*, [uitg. met een inl.] door J.A. Roetert Frederikse, Leiden 1915.

⁹⁴ *Des coninx summe*, uitg. door D.C. Tinbergen, Leiden 1907.

⁹⁵ Potter, Dirc, [in:] A. Dąbrowka, *Słownik pisarzy niderlandzkiego obszaru kulturowego...*, p. 217.

⁹⁶ Research into the *miraculum* has yielded a number of important publications, however for the sake of brevity only a few of these may be mentioned here: I. Brüning, *Das Wunder in der mittelalterlichen Legende*, Frankfurt a. M. 1952; C.F.D. Moule, *The vocabulary of a Miracle*, [in:] idem (ed.), *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History*, London 1965, pp. 235–238; A. Witkowska, *Miracula średniowieczne: forma przekazu i możliwości badawcze...*, pp. 83–87; eadem, *Miracula średniowieczne: funkcje przekazu ustnego i zapisu literackiego*, [in:] *Kultura elitarna a kultura masowa w Polsce późnego średniowiecza*, ed. B. Geremek,

ilarly as the exemplum, has proven notoriously difficult to define.⁹⁷ Recent scholarship tends to distinguish miracle narratives – the contents of hagiographic legendaries and *exemplaria*, whose subject-matter corresponds to the typical “travelling motifs” ubiquitous in this kind of literature – from *miracula*, that is, narrative texts with a verifiable authorship and origin in which miracles are described.⁹⁸ Collections of narratives about miraculous events, produced as evidence in the future canonization process of a person deceased with a reputation of sanctity, should be assigned to the latter category. Collections of *miracula* compiled in renowned sacred sites (*loca sacra*), comprised the recorded testimony of individuals who witnessed a miracle that had happened there (for instance, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary or one of the saints).⁹⁹ In the Delft church of St. Hippolyte, a *locus sacer* characterized by devotion to a miraculous figure of Mary of Jesse (*Maria* [van] *Jesse*) where, furthermore, a brotherhood of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary was involved in these matters, a record was kept of the miracles attested by pilgrims visiting this shrine.¹⁰⁰ These texts were sometimes used with an exemplary function, for instance in the context of a sermon.¹⁰¹

The end of the Carolingian period marked the time when the first Marian *miracula* started being recorded. From the second half of the 11th century onwards, after the new Marian piety had begun to develop, miracles related to sites of Marian worship were written down. These *miracula* were often recorded together with other miracle narratives in codices called *Mariale*. These were compendia of texts in different genres (narrative, including exempla, but also theological treatises, sermons, hymns and prayers) assembled for homiletic and liturgical purposes. In the following centuries, these compendia served as the sources of various popular Cistercian, Franciscan or Dominican collections of Marian exempla.¹⁰² It has been pointed out by Andrzej Dąbrówka that one

Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1978, pp. 181–188; B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000–1215*, Philadelphia 1987; M.E. Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: The Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150–1350*, Aldershot 2007.

⁹⁷ See F. Wagner, *Miracula, Mirakel...*, vol. 6, cols. 656–659.

⁹⁸ A. Witkowska, *Miracula średniowieczne: forma przekazu i możliwości badawcze...*, pp. 83–87.

⁹⁹ The literary transmission of *miracula* in the Low Countries has been analysed by W. van Anroij, 29 september 1399: in Brussel vinden twee mirakelen plaats, die kort daarop in het handschrift-Van Hulthem worden opgeschreven. *Litteraire veelzijdigheid in een stedelijke verzamelcodex*, [in:] *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis*, ed. M.A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al., Groningen 1993, pp. 86–91.

¹⁰⁰ See M. Polkowski, *A Struggle for Survival: The Continuity of Catholic Religious Literature in Holland: The Example of Delft (1450–1650)*, Lublin 2012, pp. 30–31, 109–123.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 115–116.

¹⁰² H. Hilg, *Marienmirakelsammlungen*, [in:] *Verfasserlexicon – Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters*, hrsg. von K. Ruh et al., Berlin – New York 1987, vol. 6.

of the characteristic aspects of the narratives from the *Mariale* was an “exemplary form” which highlighted the effectiveness of prayer as a means of transcending the boundary of the sacred and the profane.¹⁰³

The bibliography of Marian miracle narratives leads us once again beyond the Low Countries and into the domain of European literature, where some of the most important authors are, for instance, Gautier de Coinci (*Miracles de Nostre Dame*) or Gonzalo de Berceo (*Milagros de Nuestra Señora*).¹⁰⁴ In England, stories of this type were collected in the *South English Legendary*, *Alphabet of Tales* and other collections. In Middle Dutch literature, apart from Jacob van Maerlant’s already mentioned Marian exempla, the closest equivalent may be found in the form of vernacular collections such as the *Boeck van Onser Lieuer Vrouwen Miracule*¹⁰⁵ printed in Delft between 1477 and 1479.

At this stage one may return to the problem of the circulation of exemplum literature in a specific cultural-historical context. The Delft collection of exemplary narratives mentioned at the beginning of this article, the *Boeck van Onser Lieuer Vrouwen Miracule*¹⁰⁶, affords an interesting “case study” of the phenomenon of the production, circulation and reception of texts at a point in time when the transition from the manuscript to the printed book was only just starting to take place.¹⁰⁵ Examining this incunable, one is confronted by several questions. The most intriguing of these problems is, of course, who were its makers – writers, editors, translators, copyists, etc. – in other words, the participants of the entire “production cycle” of this book? Here one may speak, after Andrzej Dąbrówka, of an “authorial chain” of individuals contributing to the transmission of the text(-s).¹⁰⁶ And moreover, who were the readers of this book?

By analogy with other collections of exempla, it is possible to make a reasonably good reconstruction of the steps that had preceded the production of the Delft incunable. The tracks in this case lead to the houses of the Brothers, but more probably, the Sisters of the Common Life. For instance, there existed a manuscript book of Marian exempla (now lost), identified by the pioneering Dutch scholar

¹⁰³ A. Dąbrówka, *Teatr i sacrum w średniowieczu. Religia – cywilizacja – estetyka*, Wrocław 2001, p. 379 [transl. – M.P.].

¹⁰⁴ Gonzalo de Berceo, *Miracles of Our Lady*, eds. R.T. Mount, A. Grant Cash, Lexington, 1998.

¹⁰⁵ The following two paragraphs are a slightly modified version of a part of a lecture entitled ‘Centers of learning’, ‘communities of interpretation’ and ‘creative minorities’: *The users of exempla collections in late-medieval Holland*, which the author of the present paper delivered at the conference *Centres of Learning and Knowledge Exchange in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cracow, 25–26 September 2014).

¹⁰⁶ See A. Dąbrówka, *Autorstwo a piśmienność*, [in:] *Kultura pisma w średniowieczu. Znane problemy, nowe metody*, eds. A. Adamska, P. Kras, Lublin 2013, p. 40 [transl. – M.P.].

of the exemplum, Cornelius de Vooy, which had belonged to the sisters of the House of St. Jerome (Hieronymus) called "Rome" on the Rapenburg canal in Leiden.¹⁰⁷ Then, there was a handwritten book containing a Middle Dutch translation of Cesarius' *Dialogus*, whose maker is known to us – this was the nun Ave Pietersdochter of Amsterdam, who signed her name on one of the leaves, giving us also the exact date when she had finished her work: August 23, 1481, on the eve of St. Bartholomew's.¹⁰⁸ The Delft book, printed around 1477, could have been based on a similar manuscript, perhaps written in one of the city's houses of the Brethren. There were several such institutions in Delft: two monasteries for the male religious with close links to the Brethren were the House of the Virgin Mary called "Sion" and a house called the "Valley of St. Jerome" (*St. Hieronymusdal*). There were also a number of female convents: St. Agatha's, St. Barbara's, and several others.¹⁰⁹ We also know that a group of readers existed in Delft, who were familiar with this kind of literature. In the late-fifteenth century inventory of the library of the Delft convent of St. Barbara, we find an entry showing that two books containing Marian miracle narratives with a title very similar to the printed book were available to the female religious living there.¹¹⁰

An important factor in studies on the Middle Dutch exemplum is the reception of such texts. *Exemplaria* and collections of miracle narratives were often read aloud, for instance, during meals in the refectory of a house of the Brethren of the Common Life. Such collections were also used for individual study. Private meditation on the text, or in other words, rumination (*ruminatio*) was strongly encouraged by the Modern Devout's program of spiritual renewal by means of the private, intensely focused contemplation of the written word. A practical means of organizing this kind of individual reading was the "meditative scheme" (*meditatieschema*), which has been identified and analyzed by Pieter Obbema.¹¹¹ This "meditative scheme" was a schedule of the reading assigned for specific times of the day. A detailed schedule of this kind had been drawn up by a brother of the Common Life from Deventer. One of the items on this reading list were the

¹⁰⁷ C.G.N. de Vooy, *Middelnederlandsche Marialegenden en exempelen...*, p. 63. This manuscript went missing in the second half of the 20th century (see also H. Brinkman, *Dichten uit liefde. Literatuur in Leiden aan het einde van de Middeleeuwen*, Hilversum 1997, p. 292).

¹⁰⁸ This codex is in the collections of the Diocesan Museum in Haarlem (Haarlem, Bisschoppelijk Museum, Ms. S.J. 91). J. Deschamps, *Middel nederlandse handschriften...*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁹ H.C. Brouwer, *De verdwenen kloosters uit de Delfse binnenstad*, [in:] *De stad Delft, cultuur en maatschappij tot 1572. Tekst*, eds. R.A. Leeuw, I. Spaander, Delft 1981, p. 54.

¹¹⁰ "Item ij boeken van onser vrouwen miraculen". W. Moll, *De boekerij van het St. Barbara-klooster te Delft*, Amsterdam 1857, p. 12.

¹¹¹ P. Obbema, *De middeleeuwen in handen. Over de boekcultuur in de late middeleeuwen*, Hilversum 1996, pp. 135–142.

exempla of Cesarius of Heisterbach (in a Dutch vernacular translation). Arguably, the practice in other houses of the Brethren, for instance in Delft, would have been similar, although perhaps not quite as sophisticated.

The Low Countries as the place of action in the exemplum

Besides the problem of the exemplum in the medieval Netherlands, there remains another, not unrelated issue, that is, the problem of the Low Countries as the geographical setting of the plot in medieval exemplary literature. Recently, research on this subject has been carried out by Jaap van Moolenbroek with respect to the Netherlandish *couleur locale* in the stories of Cesarius of Heisterbach.¹¹² Then, for instance, there is the question of the function of the Netherlandish (or specifically – Flemish) setting of Geoffrey Chaucer's exemplum of the *Pardoner's Tale*. There, Chaucer, as we know, presents a very negative (in moral terms) picture of Flanders as a place where the inhabitants engage in debauchery and riotous living. Passages from this exemplum may serve as a small illustration of the stereotypes about the Low Countries that circulated in England during the later Middle Ages.¹¹³

After the Middle Ages – the longevity of the exemplum

The medieval exemplum influenced in a positive way the development of other genres and forms of literature such as the late-medieval and early modern Italian or French novella.¹¹⁴ Andrzej Dąbrowka considers it likely that the Middle Dutch genre of the *sproke* (which in its narrative variety has much in common with the *exemplum*) had served as a source of plot material for Middle Dutch serious secular dramatic plays (the so-called *abele spelen*).¹¹⁵ The exemplum has

¹¹² J. van Moolenbroek, *Mirakels historisch. De exempels van Caesarius van Heisterbach over Nederland en Nederlanders*, Hilversum 1999.

¹¹³ „In Flaundes whilom was a compaignye
Of yonge folk that haunteden folye,
As riot, hasard, stywes, and tavernes...”

G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, London – Vermont 1999, p. 348 (v. 463–465).

¹¹⁴ See P. Salwa, *Dawna nowela włoska – w poszukiwaniu definicji*, „Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce” 36 (1991), pp. 53–74.

¹¹⁵ A. Dąbrowka, *Słownik pisarzy niderlandzkiego obszaru kulturowego...*, p. 252.

also had points of contact with the oral epic genre of the folk tale. In the second half of the 19th century pioneering work on classifying folk tales was carried out in the Netherlands by G.J. Boekennoogen and others.¹¹⁶ Thanks to the efforts of these ethnographers and philologists, many marginalized (and by then nearly forgotten) narratives of exemplary literature inspired the writers and poets of the Romantic and Symbolist movements. In the Low Countries, the Dutchman P.C. Boutens (in the narrative poem *Beatrijs*, 1907) and the Fleming Herman Teirlinck (in the dramatic play *Ik dien* [I serve], 1924) experimented by creatively transforming the plot of the medieval *exemplum* about Beatrice. The Flemish novelist Felix Timmermans adapted the latter into a prose narrative.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere, Timmermans imitated, or even parodied, some of the stylistic features of the medieval *exemplum* or legend.¹¹⁸

In the last decades of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, the once so widespread fashion for “things medieval” has abated. Even so, the future may bring once again a new medievalism, which then may once again lead to a revival of interest in the *exemplum*. This new medievalism, hopefully, will not be merely a superficial imitation of the stylistic forms of the past, but will go hand-in-hand with a moral and spiritual renewal of the kind once anticipated by, among others, Ernst Robert Curtius.¹¹⁹

Looking at the history of the *exemplum* through the prism of continuity rather than of change, it must be emphasized that the principle of exemplification is a universal property of human reasoning. This notion is no less true today than it had been in antiquity or in the Middle Ages. Exemplification is a timeless phenomenon, the study of which has enduring relevance for our understanding of the processes of human cognition, communication and transmission of knowledge. Contemporary media or narrative discourse studies tend to support the

¹¹⁶ See A. Dąbrowka, *Baśnie niderlandzkie. Flamandzkie, holenderskie i fryzyjskie*, Warszawa 2007.

¹¹⁷ F. Timmermans, *’t Nonneken Beatrijs. Voor Professor Anton Kippenberg in vereering geschreven*, [in:] *Navigare necesse est. Eine Festgabe für Anton Kippenberg zum zweiundzwanzigsten mai MCMXXIV*, ed. K. von Düring-Kippenberg, Leipzig 1924, pp. 262–264.

¹¹⁸ See F. Timmermans, *Kindeken Jesus in Vlaanderen* (1917). This fictionalized adaptation of the Gospel story about the Nativity of Christ, set in the socio-historical context of Flanders, has an episode imitating late-medieval exemplary literature. This episode has been recently published in a Polish translation (presumably via the Italian): F. Timmermans, *Kaganek, osiołek i anioł*, [in:] *Legends chrześcijańskie*, eds. S. Klimaszewski, L. Santucci, Warszawa 2013, pp. 36–49.

¹¹⁹ E.R. Curtius wrote in the aftermath of the devastation of World War II (1947): “Wenn es ist wahr, daß vor uns dunkle Jahrhunderte und spätere, helle Renaissanceen liegen, so folgt daraus, daß der Humanismus von heute weder an die Antike noch an die Renaissance, sondern an das Mittelalter anknüpfen muß. Der neue Humanismus wird also nicht Klassizismus, sonder Mediaevalismus und Restaurationsgesinnung sein müssen”. Idem, *Kritische Essays zur Europäischen Literatur*, Bern – München 1963, p. 440.

view that a fresh enquiry into the practice of exemplification can still be very useful in the (post-)modern world, even though outwardly the forms, contexts, channels and objectives of communication are now radically different from what they used to be.¹²⁰

The Exemplum in the Literary and Religious Culture of the Late-Medieval Netherlands Summary

This article presents a synthesis of the research problems related to the Middle Dutch exemplum in the context of the religious culture of the late-medieval Netherlands. The first part of the article concerns matters of genre and related terminological issues. This starting point for these reflections is the Middle Dutch word *exempelkijn* (literally: a ‘small *exemplum*’), which may be found in the preface to a Middle Dutch collection of exemplary stories, *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miracle*<n> [Book of Our Lady’s Miracles] printed in the Delft printing workshop of Jacob Jacobszoon van der Meer and Mauritius Yemantszoon van Middelborch between 1477 and 1479. Referring to contemporary theories and definitions, and focusing on the situation in Middle Dutch studies, the author discusses arguments for distinguishing the exemplum, as a literary form, from other, related medieval narrative genres such as the miracle narrative or Marian legend. An additional illustration of these terminological dilemmas is supplied by the contents of the Middle Dutch verse narrative about the Sacristan Beatrice (*Beatrijs*). Next, with reference to the theory and practice of exemplification in classical rhetoric, the author traces the development of the exemplum in the context of the religious culture of Western Christianity, analysing various Middle Dutch realizations of the exemplum form in hagiography, homiletics, parenetic literature, etc. The problem of the truth-value of the exemplum, as it appeared to medieval authors, and its relation to both *fabula* and *historia*, are discussed in the context of the recent evolution of modern scholarly opinion on this subject. The author also traces the evolution of

¹²⁰ The revival of interest in practical rhetoric and communication science has led to the rise of narrative studies focused on the media, politics and the corporate-commercial world. The theoretical foundations of the study of narrative is discussed by A. Burzyńska, *Idee narracyjności w humanistyce*, [in:] *Narracja. Teoria i praktyka*, eds. B. Janusz, K. Gdowska, B. de Barbaro, Kraków 2008, pp. 21–36. Exemplification is an important component of the practices that should be explored in the context of studies of narrative, similarly as it had been an important part of the classical theory of rhetoric in the past.

dedicated exemplaria in Latin from the late-medieval Netherlands, and the later ‘journeys’ of these collections of texts. In the course of time some of these compendia crossed cultural and geographic boundaries, exerting a significant impact on vernacular literatures in other regions of Europe (including the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania). Finally, in the form of a ‘case study’ of the Delft collection of Marian exempla, *Boeck van onser lieuer vrouwen miraculen*, the author offers a number of hypotheses regarding the production, circulation and reception of this type of literature in the context of religious culture in the late-medieval Netherlands, concentrating on the textual practices of the Brethren of the Common Life. The article also emphasizes the impact of the exemplum on other literary modes and genres from the end of the medieval period till the present day, pointing out various modifications of, and allusions to this form in Dutch literature.

Keywords: medieval genre theory (exemplum, miracle narrative, Marian legend), religious culture, the medieval sermon, the late-medieval Netherlands (12th–15th century)